

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

February 3, 2006

**WILLOW CREEK DOCENT PROGRAM**

File No. 05-074

Project Manager: Richard Retecki

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$60,000 to the Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods for the continuation and expansion of the Willow Creek Docent Program at Willow Creek State Park.

**LOCATION:** Willow Creek State Park, Jenner, Sonoma County (see Exhibits 1 & 2)

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Public Access

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**EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: Project Location

Exhibit 2: Site Map

Exhibit 3: Letters of Support

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**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31119 and 31400 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed sixty thousand dollars (\$60,000) to the Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods for the continuation of the Willow Creek Docents Program for Willow Creek State Park.

Prior to the disbursement of any Conservancy funds:

1. The Executive Officer of the Conservancy shall approve in writing a work plan, budget and project schedule, and any contractors and subcontractors to be employed in the project.
2. The grantee shall provide a signing plan for the project, to include appropriate acknowledgement of the Conservancy.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy’s Project Guidelines and Selection Criteria adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
3. Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods is a nonprofit organization existing under Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue Service Code, whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”

**PROJECT SUMMARY:** The proposed authorization will provide up to \$60,000 to the Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods (“Stewards”) for continuation and expansion of the Willow Creek Docent Program. The program will run for four years.

In June of 2004, the Conservancy approved \$4,187, 000 towards the purchase of 3,888 acres on the Willow Creek watershed by the California Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR). The other funding agencies were the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (OSD), the Wildlife Conservation Board, and DPR. The property was purchased from the Mendocino Redwoods Company for approximately 21 million dollars. In May of 2005, the State Public Works Board approved the transfer of the property to DPR, and the property was added to the Willow Creek State Park facility that is part of the Sonoma Coast Beaches State Park. The Sonoma Coast Beaches State Park ranks third in visitors per year in the State Park system.

This project would continue and expand existing docent programs for a period of four years, and add new docent and stewardship programs for the Willow Creek State Park facility thereby helping Stewards and DPR to ensure that access to the property is consistent with the State approved operation and management plan described in the project history section, below. There are several existing programs that would be continued and expanded through this authorization.

Existing programs:

- **Willow Creek Watershed Education Program:** this program provides watershed restoration and fish habitat restoration classes for middle school and high school students. Stewards will develop new curriculum and “hands-on” service learning classes for the students in light of the park expansion.
- **Sonoma Coast Environmental Living Program:** this is a curriculum-based program that teaches students about the cultural groups who lived in the lower Russian River valley; the natural history of the area; the coastal habitats; and provides outreach to schools in underserved inland communities. A participation handbook will be developed and new docents will be trained to conduct all program activities.

- **Willow Creek Citizen Action Team:** this “team” has been collecting water quality monitoring data in the watershed for three years, and team members will expand their efforts by working on trails and doing restoration projects in coordination with DPR and LandPaths.

**New Programs:**

- **Willow Creek Interpretive Docents:** Landpaths is administering an access by permit program which allows the public to access the property within limits, after they have attended an orientation. Stewards will work with LandPaths in implementing a new docent-led hike program. Stewards will develop “thematic hikes” for the interpretive docent program, so that park visitors will receive a quality interpretive and educational experience.
- **Redwood Ecology Teachers Guide:** this new project will result in the creation and distribution of a statewide teacher resource called *Redwood Ed: A Guide for Learners and Teachers*. The guide will contain science information; redwood habitat ecological information; cultural information; and approximately three dozen classroom activities. Stewards will coordinate the development of the Redwood Ed Guide with Save-the-Redwoods-League.
- **Mounted Assistance Units:** this program will address visitor and fire safety within Willow Creek State Park. Stewards will work with LandPaths and DPR to expand the existing Trail Watch program by implementing equestrian and mountain bike assistance units. The MAU volunteers will be trained to handle different types of emergencies and they will serve as “the eyes and ears” for DPR.
- **Interpretive Signage:** Along with DPR, Stewards will develop interpretive panels that describe the Park’s flora, fauna, historical information, and the significance of the watershed. Interpretive and trail signs will also be done in Spanish.
- **Volunteer Recruitment:** Working with DPR and LandPaths, Stewards will recruit and expand the number of docents from about twenty to one hundred within three years

Stewards is aligned with DPR and supports or contributes time and effort to ten other DPR programs. They are an integral part of the necessary structure that exists and serves the Sonoma Coast State Beaches facilities. Besides the Sonoma County coastal facilities, Stewards is actively involved in the docent and educational programs at the Armstrong Redwood Grove State Park located a few miles inland in Guerneville. The Stewards are highly qualified to implement this project.

**Site Description:** The Willow Creek valley is located approximately two miles inland from the Pacific Ocean and one mile east of the community of Jenner. (Exhibits 1 & 2) The terrain is very diverse. Running east-west through the property is a broad partially open ridge with expansive views south across Willow Creek canyon to Point Reyes and north to the Russian River valley. North of the ridge the terrain is highly dissected by tributaries of Freezeout Creek, which forms a steep canyon. Directly south of the ridge are various open benches, many with willow seeps and springs. Farther to the south, the benches give way to the steep wooded slopes of Willow Creek canyon. Forested lands consist largely of redwood, including old growth, as well as Douglas Fir and mixed hardwood.

The western portion of Willow Creek forms a narrow floodplain with several open fields surrounded by tall second-growth redwood. As one travels east up Willow Creek, the floodplain is replaced by a deeply cut gorge with dense conifer forest and occasional rock-exposed canyon walls. In the area, and in portions of the main stem of Freezeout Creek, are numerous waterfalls. High above Willow Creek to the south are steep slopes and perched wooden-benches, interspersed with numerous drainages. An occasional open bench provides views north of the central ridge, and south down Willow Creek Canyon to the ocean.

Willow Creek and Freezeout Creek are major tributaries to the lower Russian River. Willow Creek drains 8.7 square miles, while Freezeout Creek drains 2.9 square miles. Elevations of Willow Creek range from 40 feet at the Russian River to the highest point of 1,292 feet on the central ridge. Freezeout Creek elevations range from 40 feet at the Russian River to 1,320 feet at its highest point. The valley's annual precipitation ranges between 50-55 inches per year. Close to thirty threatened, endangered or species of special concern in Willow Creek and Freezeout Creek watersheds. Listed fish species are Coho Salmon, steelhead trout, prickly sculpin and three-spine stickleback.

Biologists consider Willow Creek watershed to be an excellent spawning and nursery area for salmon and trout. Willow Creek comprises a stretch of fish-bearing stream on one of the Russian River's first tributaries; however, and upstream grade on the main stem currently poses difficulty for anadromous fish to swim through to upstream stretches. The mainstream and major tributaries of Willow Creek and Freezeout Creek provide the primary portion of coho and steelhead spawning and rearing habitat.

The property supports the highest density of northern spotted owls, a federally listed threatened species and a California species of special concern, in the north coast region. Osprey nests have been documented in the northern part of the property. The property is a bird watcher's paradise. Over 100 bird species have been recorded in the Willow Creek watershed.

**Project History:** Conservancy involvement in Willow Creek dates from 1987. At that time, the Conservancy funded the Sonoma County Coastal Wetland Enhancement Plan. The plan identified the Willow Creek watershed as an important part of the region's wetland system due to the fact that the watershed terminates at a freshwater marsh and riparian thicket on the south side of the Russian River. This portion of the watershed is currently part of the Sonoma Coast Beaches State Park.

In May 1996, the Conservancy funded the Sonoma County Coastal Parcel Study, conducted by the Sonoma Land Trust. The study highlighted fee acquisition and easement opportunities, trail and public access potential, and conservation of unique natural features. It also evaluated landowner willingness to sell their property. Although the study identified the Willow Creek property as a very significant opportunity for resource protection and public access, the owner of the Willow Creek property was not willing to sell at that time.

For the past three years, Conservancy staff has been meeting with the West County Coastal Collaboration Working Group that represents interested agencies, environmental groups and legislators. The working group identified the Willow Creek Property as one of the highest priorities for acquisition in the region. The Mendocino Redwood Company, which owned the property, sold the property in 2004 to a coalition of local and state agencies, including the Conservancy.

The transaction was delayed by the State's requirement that all new acquisitions have an operation and management plan in place to assist DPR with the development of the property. In May of 2005, the California Public Works Board approved the operation and management plan for Willow Creek that has allowed for the park to be opened on a "permit for access" basis. The permit program is managed by LandPaths. Presently, over 500 permits for access have been issued.

The Stewards have been active in the Willow Creek valley for some time. Stewards has a long standing working relationship with DPR to provide whale-watching programs, tide-pool education classes, and a volunteer based marine debris cleanup program at Sonoma Coast Beaches facilities. At Armstrong Redwoods State Park, Stewards provide docents and volunteers for a Redwoods Education Program, volunteers for various trail crews, and a recycling program. Stewards volunteers also staff two visitor centers, one each at Sonoma Coast Beaches and Armstrong Grove.

This authorization will allow Stewards to continue its working relationships with LandPaths and DPR and to provide necessary programs for the new state park facility. Stewards' experience and success in the provision of programs throughout the area make it highly qualified to carry out the directives of this authorization.

**PROJECT FINANCING:**

Coastal Conservancy	\$60,000
Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods	<u>45,000</u>
<b>Total Project Cost</b>	<b>\$105,000</b>

The anticipated source of funds for this project is a 2005 appropriation from the Environmental License Plate Fund to the Conservancy for public access purposes, including access operation and management and public education. The Coastal Environmental License Plate funds are generated from the Whale Tail license plate registrations and are available for the purposes of Division 21, and are generally reserved for operation and maintenance projects where bond funds are inappropriate.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

The project is consistent with Chapter 9 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding public access to and along the coast.

Section 31400.1 of the Public Resources Code authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to public agencies or nonprofit organizations to develop, operate, or manage lands for public access purposes to and along the coast that will serve greater than local needs. The addition of the Willow Creek property to the State Park system has provided increased access not only to the property, but also to the Russian River and the Sonoma Coast through a series of existing and planned trails. The docent programs operated by the Stewards will provide the necessary staffing to promote the park's educational, interpretive, and environmental attributes. Also, docent led

programs will provide access to the other trail systems that provide access to the coast, as well as to inland locations.

This project is also consistent with Section 31400.3, authorizing the Conservancy to provide such assistance as is required to aid public agencies and nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal accessways, and related functions necessary to meet Division 21 objectives. It is also consistent with Section 31119, pursuant to which the Conservancy is authorized to award grants to nonprofit organizations for educational projects.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S  
STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL (S) & OBJECTIVE (S):**

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective A**, The proposed Willow Creek Docent Program project will provide educational, interpretive, and environmental improvements for public access for a new state park facility.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S  
PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

**Required Criteria**

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** Willow Creek Docent Program has very strong legislative, agency, nonprofit organization and public support. See Exhibit 3, "Letters of Support."
4. **Location:** The Willow Creek property is partly within and partly outside the coastal zone, is a coastal watershed with diverse and valuable flora and fauna. The watershed is part of the Russian River watershed and connects with the river less than two miles from the ocean. Trails on the property provide access to the Russian River and the Willow Creek watershed, and also connect hikers to the coast through the Red Hill property. See Exhibits 1 & 2.
5. Other than the "in-kind" matching funds from Stewards, there are no other funds available for continuation and expansion of the docent program for Willow Creek State Park. Without Conservancy funds these programs will not proceed. Although there were several funding sources for the acquisition (the Conservancy included), there are not funds from other agencies available for the Docent Program.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The acquisition and subsequent opening of Willow Creek to the public added approximately 3,900 acres to an existing and highly popular State Park facility. The natural diversity of Willow Creek (see Site Description) and its proximity to the Russian River and the coast, make this project a necessity in regards to the provision of

public access and public access related programs to the area. The project has importance regionally and statewide.

### **Additional Criteria**

7. **Urgency:** Approval of this authorization will address the pressing need to offer new and increased public access to the Willow Creek valley, the Russian River, and the coast. The provision of these programs will enhance the experience of hikers, bicyclists, equestrians, students, bird watchers, and all of those who choose to participate in the Stewards programs.
8. **Conflict resolution:** This project will solve part of the conflict of DPR not being able to provide the necessary staff and funds to operate this new park site. Although LandPaths is facilitating the operation and management of the facility, this authorization will allow Stewards to provide more comprehensive educational, interpretive, and environmental programs for the park.
9. **Innovation:** In a time of severe budget shortfalls, where state policy would otherwise thwart the efforts of DPR to open and operate additional parkland to public use, this project will utilize an innovative combination of public and nonprofit resources to serve those needs.
10. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** The Conservancy was initially involved in the Willow Creek watershed in 1987, with the Proposition 70 analysis for coastal acquisitions in Sonoma county. Recently, the property was again evaluated in the 1998 Sonoma County Coastal Parcel Analysis as a priority for acquisition. Also, the Russian River DPR District included the property as an acquisition priority in its recent General Plan preparation. All of those studies highlighted the enormous natural value of the watershed, along with the potential that exists for the public access to the Russian River and the coast.
11. **Cooperation:** The Willow Creek Docent Program project is a cooperative effort among the Conservancy, DPR, the State Department of Fish and Game, the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District, LandPaths, and the Stewards. All of the participants are actively members of the West County/Coastal working group and are involved in this and other projects within the watershed.

**CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:** The proposed authorization is consistent with the Sonoma County Local Coastal Program, certified in 1981 and revised on August 3, 1999, in the following respects:

#### **V. Recreation: Development and Operation of Accessways, pages 42-43:**

Public accessways must be managed and properly maintained to protect natural resources and public safety, and to prevent adverse impacts to adjacent properties. The Willow Creek Docent Program project will provide programs that will assist LandPaths and DPR's efforts to continue and broaden the public's experiences while involved in recreation at Willow Creek. It will take into consideration the sensitivity of natural resources, provide safe public access, and include the surrounding property owners in the docent programs.

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:** The proposed project is categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15301, the operation and maintenance of existing facilities involving only negligible expansion of use; and Section 15323, which applies to the normal operations of existing facilities for public

gatherings for which normal facilities were designed, where there is a past history of the same or similar activity occurring for at least three years and a reasonable expectation that similar activity will continue to occur. Although applicable to facilities such as stadiums, swimming pools, and amusement parks, this exemption would also pertain to the circumstances present here, where public access is being provided for a new state park facility. The continuation of the current docent program, and the creation of new docent programs, and of data, educational, and interpretive information, are exempt under CEQA pursuant to 14 CCR Section 15262 (feasibility and planning for future actions not yet adopted, approved or funded) and 15306 (information collection).